

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-1B**

NEW YORK TIMES
18 October 1985

A.C.L.U. Vows to Fight Morison Conviction

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17 — An attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union said today that the espionage conviction of Samuel Loring Morison would have a "chilling effect on all public debate of national security matters."

"The A.C.L.U. views this conviction as a threat to the First Amendment in its central purpose of protecting public debate about issues of public importance," said Morton H. Halperin, director of the A.C.L.U.'s Washington area office. "It will fight it in the courts, in the Congress and in the public arena."

However, Jane Kirtley, a spokesman for the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said: "We don't really have a formal reaction to his conviction because we've never really seen this as a First Amendment case. He was a Government employee and he was subject to the rules and regulations of his employer."

Mr. Halperin said that in pressing for

the indictment and conviction of Mr. Morison, the Justice Department has "distorted the statutes" and followed a course that "Congress did not intend."

"Mr. Morison is the first American convicted of a crime for allegedly providing classified defense information to the press," he said. "If his conviction is upheld on appeal, the executive branch and the courts will have done what Congress has consistently refused to do — it will have created an official secrets act."

First Amendment Threat Seen

Mr. Halperin added: "This action, if sustained, will have a chilling effect on all public debate on national security matters. By threatening indictments under the statutes under which Mr. Morison was convicted, the Government will be able to determine what information can be published."

Mr. Halperin said he was "amazed" at the lack of reaction to the Morison

trial "in the press or from organizations representing the press."

Several other groups with interests in First Amendment issues, including the American Newspaper Publishers Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors, did not join the civil liberties group in protesting the Morison case. But spokesmen for both groups said today that they might seek to enter in an appeal by Mr. Morison.

Terry McGuire, vice president and general counsel of the publishers' association, said the organization had "kept an eye on" the Morison trial, but added: "We more frequently intervene when these matters reach the appellate court. We have not made a decision to intervene yet, but we will probably review it as early as next week."

Richard M. Schmidt, general counsel of the editors' association, took a similar stand. "The A.S.N.E. normally does not get involved in these cases at the trial level," he said, "but generally on the appellate level."